

Arsenal responds to Hurricane Katrina

by Rachel Newton

The Pine Bluff Arsenal Child and Youth Services Center opened its doors Aug. 31 and Sept. 1 to families staying in area hotels and receptions centers displaced due to Hurricane Katrina.

They came from towns such as Metairie, Kenner and New Orleans, La.

Despite their weariness and heavy hearts, these men, women and grateful children, greeted staff at PBA with sounds of laughter and smiles.

The hurricane struck the Gulf Coast Aug. 28, and devastated areas of Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama and Florida. Arkansas is one of many states where refugees have come.

"We wish we could do more for the families who are staying in the area," said Col. Brian Lindamood, Arsenal commander. "We will make everything available to them that we can. Mike Parker, director of the Chemical Materials Agency, has given us the green light to provide any and all assistance that we are capable of."

Lindamood authorized an Arsenal-wide hurricane relief effort Aug. 31 in partnership with the White Hall community to collect donations for the victims. Trucks started filling up on Sept. 1 and additional trucks were brought in. Items of need included bottled water, toiletries, first aid kits, flashlights, trash bags, batteries and ready-to-eat foods. The efforts continued through Sept. 7.

"I encourage everyone to pray for and think about those who are in and have family or friends within the affected areas," said Lindamood.

Three off-duty firefighters from the Arsenal fire department, Ed Gibbins, Earl Martin and Derwin Jones, contributed their time at drop-off points in White Hall and Little Rock. "These firefighters have been helping to load the trucks on their own time," said Tom Braumuller, assistant fire chief, who volunteered his time Sept. 1 at the CYS center.

Braumuller also said that PBA firefighters might be heading to New Orleans to provide help to firefighters there.

Missy Brodnax, CYS director, said that flyers were taken to all the local hotels offering a reprise. "It was a break from the tragedy for them," she said. "The response has been amazing. We had 31 people Aug. 31 and even more Sept. 1. When we were asked why we were doing this we simply stated our mission – we care!"

Games, arts and crafts, computer access and lunch were provided to the families. "The computer lab has been a blessing to these families," said Brodnax. "They have been able to reconnect and search for news about their homes."

As with any tragedy, the personal stories are the most touching and heart wrenching. One little boy said that he knew Santa Claus would be able to come, because he could fly over the water and come for Christmas. Another lady commented about how generous people have been with money and even groceries. She told the story of a family who was helped by one lady at an area grocery store. "The lady gave two carts to the family and told them to buy whatever they wanted, and she would take care of it," she said.

Approximately 40 people – 10 families – participated in the services provided by CYS Sept. 1. Brodnax said that a similar service will be provided next week if the need is there. "Our goal is to help them anyway we can," she said.